H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Living on the Border: European Border Regions in Comparison. Sankelmark: Foundation for the German-Polish co-operation; Willy Brandt Centre at the University Wrocław (Poland); Universität Flensburg (Germany); Syddansk Universitet (Denmark); Technische Universität Dresden (Germany), 27.09.2012-29.09.2012.

Reviewed by Andrea Varriale
Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2012)

Living on the Border: European Border Regions in Comparison

The core of the seminar were two in-depth accounts of the Polish-German and of the Danish-German borders. A good half of the seminar has been devoted to shorter presentations about other borderlands and minorities in Europe, such as the Eastern German-Western German, the Latvian-Russian, or the Moroccan-Spanish. A few more contribution were devoted to borders in European higher education and in asylum policy.

The seminar was opened by CHARLOTTE GAITANIDES (Flensburg). By combining practical expertise and legal remarks, Gaitanides offered a disenchanted view on the functioning of EU-funded Cross-Border Co-operation projects (CBC) and an assessment of their purported role as drivers of European integration. The addressed issue is whether border regions are rightfully portrayed as "microcosms of European integration" or whether this enthusiasm is misplaced. Her position lies on the realistic end of this range. Gaitanides argued that CBC projects are often little known by the very populations they are supposed to address, which raises questions about their legitimacy and real aim. She also noted how this shortcoming reveals a top-down policy approach, which has more to do with the normative views of the member states or the European Commission than with the needs of the populations in the borderland. Bottom-up initiatives are no panacea either, since they may well turn CBC projects into financing platforms for unrelated projects. She finally noted that institutional reforms on CBS (such as the creation of the EGTS platform, within the Committee of the Regions) do not necessarily bring more transparency or effectiveness. The success of CBC projects, she argues, ultimately relies on political will and cooperation between determined individuals. Gaitanides' contribution was a valuable warning not to indulge in a too complacent or idealised view on CBS.

The following panel concerned the Polish-German border. ELŻBIETA OPIŁOWSKA (Wrocław) has illustrated the evolution of the Polish-German border by considering both the legal aspects and its daily-life significance. A peculiarity of this borderland was that most of its inhabitants (of both sides) were recently displaced people and had little or no experience of each other as neighbours. The lack of regional identity, coupled with strict border controls from both communist states, meant that the two populations remained largely separated and unaware of life beyond the border. Another leitmotif was the perceived uncertainty of the Oder-Neisse border, which had been agreed upon in 1945. In this sense, a big contribution came from the Polish government's habit to revive the threat of German revisionism in response to internal discontent. This in fact overrode the official rhetoric of friendship among communist states. Things changed between 1972 and 1980, when the border was opened. This caused a manifold increase of people crossing the border in both directions. In her research, Opiłowska found that the opening of the border helped to remove prejudices, and lessened the fear of German revisionism in the Polish population. But this would not last long. Economic difficulties in both countries and the rise of the *Solidarność* movement led to the eventual closure of the border until 1989. The following two decades have witnessed several CBC projects, town twinning, and examples of functional cooperation (later also within the framework of the EU). However, her main finding is that this cooperation has been largely an "elite game" with no visible "trickle down" effect on the masses. This seems consistent with the claim made by Gaitanides at the offset of the seminar. Opiłowska concluded by calling for more bottom-up initiatives (grassroots cooperation).

KATARZYNA STOKŁOSA (Sønderborg) drew on the framework ironed out by Opiłowska and focussed on the changing perception of the GDR-Polish border in the divided town of Görlitz/Zgorzelec. The first finding is that the border was, and is still, perceived differently by dif-

ferent people on both sides: some feared it while others sought to cross it, some people perceived guards and fences as obsessive reminders of the border, while others only noticed it in special circumstances. She also found that stereotypes still abound. Poles are often depicted as car thieves, petty criminals and slackers. Conversely, one of the most common characterisation of Germans was the one of Nazi. Stokłosa also found that those most prone to stereotypical characterisations normally lack either knowledge or long-term relation with those "on the other side". However, one should not simplistically conclude that abundance of contact always generate positive attitudes. This, she stresses, would only be true if a person's first experience of the other were always positive, which cannot obviously be the case. This difference is clear when comparing the older generations, generally more enthusiastic about crossing the border, with the younger ones, who are more disenchanted about the possibility to live or simply meet people across the border. Crossing the border after a long period of separation, it seems, carries for the older generations a much greater significance than passing the border without having experienced how difficult this used to be.

The second panel concerned the border between Germany and Denmark. MARTIN KLATT (Sønderborg) briefly presented the history of the border in the last two centuries and then offered some considerations about the current situation, mostly in terms of inter-group integration. One of the leitmotifs was the question whether minorities are drivers of cross-border cooperation. For the case at hand, Klatt found that, taken as a group, national minorities of both nationalities have long *hindered* CBC, as they feared a hidden agenda (e.g. border revision) or the loss of their specific identity. Conversely, individuals in the two groups have benefited greatly from their ability to communicate in both cultures, especially in terms of education and job opportunities. This does not exclude that a significant number of people living on the border has little or no knowledge of the other's diversity, and crosses the border mainly for cheap shopping. While the Schleswig/Slesvig region displays a comparatively high degree of tolerance and integration (minority parties on both sides get votes from the majority groups too), inconveniences such as the reduction of public funding to Danish schools in Germany in 2011, have quickly dug up old prejudices. Depictions of Germans seeking Danish social aid and of Danish children being brought to school by taxi were promptly refreshed. However, Klatt noted that in general the identification of minorities with their kin state is fading away. He concludes with an intriguing remark on whether the "Unity" part of the slogan "Unity in diversity" is really a necessity for the two groups or rather a fossil of national normative thinking.

In his presentation, STEEN BO FRANDSEN (Sønderborg) offered a few "cartographic" considerations on how the notion of border is graphically and psychologically constructed: a neat line on the map, beyond which we find either a blank space or a differently coloured country. This clear-cut distinction relies functionally on the conception of countries as homogeneous territories. Academia has not escaped this view, either: on its foundation in 1972, the Danish Institute for Border Studies was in charge to study the Danish part of the borderland only. In a methodological note, Frandsen claimed that border regions are best explored in comparisons, both within and without national borders. He also stressed the heuristic power of the centre-periphery dichotomy, which helps make sense of why border regions fall prey of their respective centres. Frandsen concludes with a thought-provoking claim (based on declined importance of Flensburg), that borders do not merely *signal* a peripheral area, but rather *create* one.

The conference continued with more localised accounts of life on the border. First was GERHARD BESIER's (Dresden) contribution about the border between the two Germanies. He made extensive considerations on the deep ambivalence (and schizophrenic potential) of a recurrence - 8/9 of May 1945 - which has long been understood as either the liberation from Nazi rule by the red army and the inception of an anti-fascist state, or as the brutal occupation by a foreign power. As a result, both official celebration and mourn were avoided in both countries. He made further engaging observations on how the war has been elaborated by German citizens in terms of pride, honour, and shame. His main finding is that family allegiance has systematically overridden school-based education in Western Germany, whereas in the East the "anti-fascist liberation" rhetoric also served the purpose to avoid guilt.

CHRISTIAN PLETZING (Sankelmark) focussed on a previously unknown Jewish community in Kashubia, a region near Danzig. This Jewish community, which disappeared during WWII, has been entirely forgotten by the local population. Cemeteries and Synagogues were destroyed during the German occupation, and some of these spaces are today parking lots. The only relic of the Karthaus Synagogue is a David's star found at a local market by chance. This research has later evolved into local initiatives and historical-touristic publications to revive the memory of Jews in Kashubia.

The next panels saw a few short presentations on

other European borders. JAUME CASTAN (Sønderborg) presented the case of the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco. These two towns mobilise a disproportioned rhetorical arsenal in Spanish political discourse, such as the idea that Spain is - just like Turkey - a "bi-continental state". Similarly, Moroccan official statements never refer to Ceuta and Melilla without the appellative of "occupied city". This is at odds with the "bonne entente" which officially inspires the Spanish-Moroccan relationships. This situation is further complicated by geopolitical issues involving Algeria and the Belisarius liberation movement in Western Sahara. Castan showed that territoriality, a seemingly outdated concept, "is still in good shape". LAURA ASARITE (Flensburg) illustrated a recent border issue between Latvia and Russia with a clear-cut and solid argument that a shift has taken place in Latvia's mainstream politics. If previously a huge symbolic importance was attached to Russia recognising Latvia's version of history, just few years later a much more pragmatic approach prevailed. Despite several protests, Latvia's leaders eventually signed the border agreement with Russia without further historical remarks. Other contributions covered topics such as the development of the Saarland-Lorraine-Luxemburg as a relatively integrated border region (DINARA APAKIDZE, Flensburg), the evolution of German-Italian interaction and identification strategies in Tyrol (ANDREA VARRIALE, Flensburg) and the isolation of a Turkish minority across the Bulgarian-Greek border (NURI TAHRIR, Sønderborg).

A few presentations related to borders in a more oblique way. Wulk and Zimmer both studied borders in relation with the European high education system. SEBASTIAN ZIMMER (Flensburg) favoured an "internal market" approach, which stressed how the lack of standardisation in diplomas hinders the free movement of students within the European Union. SOPHIE WULK (Flensburg) presented her on-going PhD research on educational diplomacy in the EU. She interviews several exchange students from Turkey to understand whether their experience has had any impact on the way Europe is perceived beyond its borders. OSAMA SALEM (Flensburg) stressed the huge variance in EU countries' asylum policy, and the lack, in practice, of a unified strategy.

In general, the seminar offered a variegated and informative view on many of the possible issues, constellations and initiatives which characterise life in on the border. The amount of information provided was conveniently made more digestible by contributors repeatedly resorting to anecdotes and personal experiences to make their cases. This has recreated the pleasant and fresh atmosphere appreciated in its first edition in 2011 but coupled it, this time, with more and more diverse contributions, bolder claims and more intense discussions.

Conference Overview:

Welcoming

Elisabeth Vestergaard (Head of department of Border Studies, University of Southern Denmark)

Stephan Panther (Head of the International Management Institute, University of Flensburg)

Christian Pletzing (Director of Akademie Sankelmark)

Introduction

Charlotte Gaitanides (University of Flensburg): The Microcosm of European Integration: The functioning of EU-financed cross-border co-operations

Panel I: The German-Polish border region

Elżbieta Opiłowska (University of Wrocław): History of the German-Polish border region and the Europeanization of border regions - a research paradigm

Katarzyna Stokłosa (University of Southern Denmark): Border in consciousness and narratives of the inhabitants of the German-Polish border region

Panel II: The German-Danish border region

Steen Bo Frandsen (University of Southern Denmark): History of regions

Martin Klatt (University of Southern Denmark): Sønderjylland-Schleswig - celebrating unity in diversity?

Evening speech

Gerhard Besier (Technical University of Dresden): West German and East German cultures of remembrance after the end of the Second World War: The ideological border as a cause of different memorial processes in a psycho-historical perspective

Christian Pletzing: Commuters in a border region - Jews in Kashubia

Panel III: Other European border regions (Part I)

Andrea Varriale (Student at University of Flensburg): Tirol Euroregion: bridging the wrong border?

Jaume Castan (University of Southern Denmark): The Spanish-Moroccan relationship: combining bonne entente with territorial disputes

Grätel Marksteiner and Nicolae Balc (Students at University of Southern Denmark): Banat - Evolution and perspectives of a multicultural border region.

Panel IV: Other European border regions (Part II)

Laura Asarite (University of Flensburg): From a look backwards to a look forwards - the way to the border agreement between Latvia and Russia

Dinara Apakidze (Student at University of Flensburg): Identities in the Euroregion SaarLorLux

Jutta Bissinger (Student at University of Southern Denmark): Project "Neighbourhoods in Europe"

Sebastian Zimmer (PhD candidate at University of Flensburg): Borders in European Education

Panel V: Other European border regions (Part III)

Osama Salem (PhD candidate at University of Flensburg): Fortress Europe. An overview on the EU asylum and refugee system

Sophie Wulk (PhD candidate at University of Flensburg): Educational Diplomacy beyond borders. The case of Turkey and the Jean Monnet Scholarship

Nuri Tahir (Visiting fellow at University of Southern Denmark): Bulgarian-Greek Border Region: Cross-border Cooperation under the Shadow of Minority Issues

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Andrea Varriale. Review of , *Living on the Border: European Border Regions in Comparison.* H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37507

Copyright © 2012 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.